

□ Reading time: 45 min.

*At the conclusion of the 29<sup>th</sup> General Chapter of the Salesians, we invited Don Pascual Chávez, Rector Major Emeritus and the only Salesian to have taken part in the last nine General Chapters, to outline a synthesis of the Congregation's journey. With great willingness he accepted the invitation, offering a reflection that starts from the Second Vatican Council, a decisive junction in our recent history. Certainly, not everyone will agree with this vision, but his view represents a precious light: it illuminates the road travelled and, at the same time, orients the steps ahead of us.*

This article is intended to illustrate, on the one hand, the sixty years of reflection and self-knowledge that the Congregation has undertaken within the social, cultural, and ecclesial context, endeavouring to discover the challenges of young people and the world to which it has sought to respond, and, on the other hand, to offer an evaluation of the results obtained and the challenges still unresolved or emerging.

Two affirmations by Fr. Vecchi effectively summarise the need for this change and the evolution that has taken place, 'What happens within the Congregation is linked to transformations taking place in the Church and in culture'. And later, comparing the image of the Salesians before this evolution with the one after twenty years, "An evolution has therefore taken place, and is still taking place, regarding the practical way of understanding the educational task".[\[1\]](#)

## **1. A new era in the life of the Church**

The Second Vatican Council, defined by Fr. Viganò as 'the ecclesial event of the century, a visitation of the Holy Spirit to the Church, the great prophecy for the third millennium of Christianity'[\[2\]](#), initiated a reform of the Church to which all Congregations were called and which the Salesians embraced.

Vatican II had issued a challenge and a call to all Religious Institutes to faithfully and boldly redesign the specific charismatic identity of the Founder.

The reasons that led the Church to call for a profound renewal of Religious Life can be summarised in three areas:

### **1.1 The reference to the person of Jesus**

Consecration to God in the following of Jesus can only be understood as a response

to a personal call, which results in a special encounter with Jesus through the profession of the three vows (obedience, poverty, chastity), and which makes Jesus and His Gospel 'the living and supreme Rule'.

### ***1.2 Our place in the Church***

The fact that Religious Life is not an alternative to the Church, but a form of evangelical life within it, has theoretical and, above all, practical consequences:

- The distinctive character of Religious Life does not imply any superiority over other Christians;
- The position of Religious Life within the ecclesial community places it in a complementary relationship with the other vocations of Christian life: lay people and priests;
- The specificity of Religious Life consists in being essentially and always an evangelical form of life. This means that the Gospel constitutes the ultimate norm, whereby the superior can never replace Christ, nor the Rule be superior to the Gospel, nor can the rhythm of life be marked by anything other than the liturgical cycles of the year.

### ***1.3 The relationship with the world***

Although for a long time Christianity and Religious Life were presented as a denial of the world or an escape from it, the Second Vatican Council proclaimed the goodness of creation and the world "which God so loved and for which he offered his only Son" (cf. Jn 3:16), and its relative autonomy. One cannot therefore conceive of a religious life as an escape from the world, but rather as a call to actively engage in continuing the mission of Jesus.[\[3\]](#)

Both the profound transformations that took place in the world from the 1960s onwards and this renewed awareness of the Church to be at the service of the world and of mankind gave the pastoral dimension a considerable impulse.

In fact, 'this emergence of the "pastoral" as a category of orientation and evaluation for the Church's various interventions is a consequence of the Second Vatican Council, called (by John XXIII himself) a "pastoral Council" precisely because of the slant and approach of its entire reflection'.[\[4\]](#)

This commitment presupposed "moving the Congregation towards an attentive reflection on the historical moment, solidarity with the urgencies of the world, and the needs of the little ones and the poor, in a growth homogeneous with the identity

of the initial project and its original values, aroused by the Spirit and destined for a vital development beyond the transient coverings".[5]

It was therefore not simply a matter of renewing our Salesian praxis, but rather the Salesian and Salesian life. "The prophecy that the world of youth awaits from us Salesians today is, first and foremost, the newness of heart inflamed by the ardour of that pastoral charity defined by Don Bosco in his "*da mihi animas cetera tolle*".[6]

## **2. The great stages of the journey**

In the delicate process desired by the Church, three 'extraordinary' General Chapters allowed the Congregation to place itself in the historical orbit of Vatican II, specifying the Salesian identity in the Church and in the contemporary world. While GC19, held during the Council, "became aware and prepared", GC20 "put into orbit", GC21 "reviewed, rectified, confirmed, and deepened"; GC22 was called to "re-examine, specify, complete, perfect, and conclude".[7]

Three other "ordinary" General Chapters followed, focusing on specific topics of an operational nature, considered particularly urgent for the entire Congregation, but in a certain sense sectoral, since they did not concern the totality of Salesian life: education to the faith of the young, the involvement of the laity in Salesian life and mission, and the contemporary Salesian community.

### **2.1 Special General Chapter 20[8] (1971).**

#### ***Ecclesial and social context***

The GC19 (1965), celebrated when the Second Vatican Council was almost at its conclusion (although among the documents already promulgated, the capitulars mainly used the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* on the Liturgy, the decree *Inter Mirifica* on the means of social communication, and the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* on the Church, the last session with the promulgation of important documents was still lacking) gathered the first impulses of the great conciliar event on the renewed sense of the Church's mission in the world, on the dynamism of Religious Life and its communitarian and ecclesial dimension, on the revision of Pastoral Care and its needs for pluralism and decentralisation, thus constituting the best preparation for the CGS20.

In fact, this was a Special General Chapter, with a particular and extraordinary character, aimed at satisfying the requirements of the Sacred Congregation for

Religious and Secular Institutes (*Motu Proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae*) to proceed with the revision and “adequate renewal” of the Congregation according to the broad, essential, and demanding objectives indicated by the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* and the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, in harmony with the spirit of the Founder.

Other relevant factors at a contextual level, were three decisive phenomena that shaped the world in which the mission of the Church and the Congregation was realised at that time, and which could influence all of them as they were still evolving processes:

- A world in the process of secularisation, which led the Church to reposition itself and redefine a new type of presence and action.
- A world characterised by situations of injustice, as a consequence of socio-economic structures, which placed the Church before the imperative to adopt a resolutely evangelical attitude in favour of the poor.
- A world in search of unity in pluralism, which required the Church to live its ‘catholicity’ in a more current and dynamic way.

As frequently happens in this type of transformation, the most vulnerable were the young people who, on the one hand, emerged as a social phenomenon and, on the other, manifested disturbing behaviour such as voluntary marginalisation, changing customs, drug addiction, and delinquency.

The Chapter, however, did not simply intend to fulfil the demands of the Second Vatican Council as a mere formality, but took the opportunity to respond better to God and the young. In fact, the GCS was preceded by a very thorough preparation by means of a consultation addressed to all the Provinces with an “X-ray” of the state of the Congregation. In this way they became aware of the most urgent problems and issues that occupied the interest and concern of Salesians throughout the world, and which required illumination, discernment, and decisions.

### ***Challenges to be met: Reformulating a total project***

The fundamental question was how to make the particular witness of religious life visible and relevant in the Church (LG 44).

In order for religious life to be able to respond to this mission (“to belong to the life and holiness of the Church”), *Perfectae Caritatis* required a commitment to renewal from all religious families:

- a) Make the '*sequela Christi*' the supreme rule of life;
- b) Ensure its identity and mission, in fidelity to the Founder;
- c) Become more decisively involved in the life of the Church;
- d) Help the members of the Congregation to know how to interpret the signs of the times, in their context and as interlocutors in the mission;
- e) Promote above all, spiritual renewal "to which corresponds the first place also in the external works of the apostolate" (PC 2).

Fr. Luigi Ricceri expressed it this way in his letter of convocation of the CGS: "Contribution and co-responsibility are above all indispensable to promote in us and in our communities that interior, spiritual, apostolic renewal based on our conformity to Christ, on fidelity to Don Bosco's essential charism and to the signs of the times. Without this, every work of renewal and adaptation would be reduced to formalism, technicality, body without soul, illusion of solving living problems with formulas and articles." [\[9\]](#)

CGS 20 (1971) articulated the entire issue around four fundamental themes:

1. Nature and purpose of the Congregation.
2. Religious consecration and its relationship with mission.
3. Formation of the Salesian.
4. Governance structures at all levels.

The objective was to draw up a renewed text of the Constitutions and Regulations in harmony with the conciliar orientations. In essence, it was a matter of re-founding the identity of the Congregation.

### **Choices made**

Seven months of chapter work produced 22 documents containing doctrinal and operational guidelines, divided into five sections that would later shape the constitutional text:

- The first section reflected the capitulars' main concern: 'the mission of the Salesians in the Church', identifying the oratory as the paradigm for the renewal of all works.
- The second section focused on the "community dimension of religious life".
- In the third, under the term 'consecration', the vows were presented in the conciliar perspective.
- The fourth outlined the 'main criteria for formation and some practical guidelines'.
- The last one formulated unity and decentralisation, subsidiarity, participation, and

co-responsibility as 'criteria for the organisation of the Congregation'.[\[10\]](#)

A more charismatic and less legalistic reformulation of the 'Constitutional Text' was drafted, adapting language and approach to the orientations of the Council, and unifying in a single text the spiritual riches of the Salesian vocation and the fundamental norms governing life: mission, communion, consecration, formation and organisation.

The 'Regulations' codified the universal practical way of living the Constitutions, delegating to the Provinces the responsibility for establishing and regulating local aspects or the needs of particular situations, through the Provincial Directors.

To evaluate the effects of the *renovatio accomodata*, it is significant to observe its influence on three of the most sensitive areas of Salesian life:

– Concerning **formation**, Fr. Ricceri in his *General Report on the state of the Congregation* pointed out that some formation houses, novitiates and Studentates had had to close due to a lack of vocations or internal difficulties and tensions. He particularly deplored the oblivion and weakening of the Salesian charism in formation, doctrinal deviations, the contesting attitude towards institutions, and the lack of responsibility of some formators.[\[11\]](#)

– As far as **the community** was concerned, the most profound change concerned the nature of relations between superiors and brothers, which became simpler, with the function of governance moving closer and closer to that of animation. At the same time, there was a growth in participation and co-responsibility.

– The **works**, for their part, did not achieve the "downsizing" desired by GC19 for a more incisive apostolic effectiveness. The decrease in the number of Salesians (from around 22,000 in 1965 to 17,000 in 1977) was balanced by the increase in lay collaborators, whose formation required special attention. At the same time, provincial youth pastoral centres were being set up and some Salesians were experimenting with forms of insertion in difficult neighbourhoods or working with street kids and young drug addicts, as well as new ways of collaborating with civil institutions.[\[12\]](#)

## 2.2 General Chapter 21[\[13\]](#) (1978)

### ***Ecclesial and social context***

The depth and speed of change, a consequence of the Second Vatican Council, generated a situation of turmoil and confusion in the Church and the Congregation that required clarity of approach and wisdom in solutions.

The profoundly renewing action carried out in the Congregation by the CGS (evident in the radically renewed Constitutions and Regulations, while remaining faithful to Don Bosco's spirit, and in the ideas and operational orientations contained in the Acts of this Chapter) needed revision, rectification, deepening, and reconfirmation.

The socio-cultural context was also undergoing rapid and profound transformations in many nations, increasing the confrontation between young and adult generations. According to Fr. Vecchi's analysis, the second half of the 1970s represented for some the end of the '68 era and the universe of youth protest, while for others it marked the worsening of the crisis at an economic, social, political, and cultural level.[\[14\]](#)

Among the most significant aspects of this period, examined against the light, paradoxes and contradictions emerged:

- The exaltation of the person and, at the same time, its instrumentalisation.
- The aspiration for freedom coexists with the oppression of many freedoms.
- The search for higher values as opposed to the repugnance of all values.
- The desire for solidarity contrasted with a crisis of participation.
- The speed of exchanges and information against the slowness of cultural and social reforms.
- The yearning for universal unity and peace along with the persistence of political, social, racial, religious, and economic conflicts.
- The exaltation of youth parallels the frequent marginalisation of young people from work, decision-making, and responsibility.

### ***Challenges to be faced: verifying renewal***

It was necessary to ascertain precisely *whether, how and to what extent* the desired renewal in the acceptance and living of the Constitutions had been achieved. It was necessary to identify any gaps in the renewal project desired by the CGS. More concretely, how to keep the Congregation vitally young and, though renewed, always faithful to the vision clearly outlined by Don Bosco?

It was necessary to correct possible deviations or false and harmful interpretations, overcoming the risk of 'different' or, even worse, opposing motivations, visions, and judgments, which could empty the soul of the Congregation and its very reason for being in the Church.

It was necessary to deepen some essential themes for the Congregation: the Preventive System, Formation for Salesian Life, the Salesian Coadjutor, and the restructuring of the Salesian Pontifical University.

This process of identity clarification, reinforced by the influence of the Fourth Synod of Bishops that culminated in Paul VI's magisterial Encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, progressively contributed to deepening the specific Salesian mission, translating into one of the great choices of this Chapter: to transform the Salesians into authentic evangelisers of the young.

On the one hand, the GC21 carefully observed the youth and discovered – sustained perhaps by typically Salesian optimism – a happy convergence between their aspirations, their voice addressed to the Salesians and our mission. On the other hand, it considered the Church's renewed commitment to evangelisation and rediscovered the fundamental trait of our identity in this evangelising mission to the young, which presupposed the prior evangelisation of the Salesians themselves.

### ***Choices made: Missionaries in education***

In his concluding address, Fr. Viganò, newly elected Rector Major, summarised the three objectives that emerged during the chapter work:

1. The priority task of bringing the Gospel to young people, implying an educational-pastoral project;
  2. The religious spirit that should animate the life of the Salesians;
  3. The new role of the Salesian community as animator of the pastoral educative community (CEP), a consequence of the realisation that religious are not the only agents of the Gospel and are called to become formators and animators of the laity.
- This specified the main theme of the Chapter: 'Being witnesses and proclaiming the Gospel: two requirements of Salesian life among the young'. At the same time, other fundamental choices were made:
- Make catechesis the natural and most fertile ground for the renewal of the entire Church community.
  - Allow the Congregation a further six years to get to know, assimilate, and practically experiment with the Constitutional text, to which improvements were



made suggested by lived experience, especially regarding the co-responsibility of the laity, the function of the superior, and formation communities.

Undoubtedly, GC21 represented a radical pastoral renewal. The Congregation felt itself challenged by the Church and society and, in the conclusion of the first chapter of the Document “The Salesians as Evangelisers of Youth”, took on the commitment to better understand the new reality of youth and face the new challenges it presented (the phenomena arising from the growing secularisation of society, such as religious indifference, practical atheism or sects, the persistent poverty of the Third World and the emergence of new forms of poverty, such as unemployment, marginalisation, the disintegration of the family, the spread of eroticism and drugs), drawing up the Pastoral Education Project so as not to lose sight of the essential, not to invert the hierarchy of objectives and guarantee the quality of the educational programmes of the works.[\[15\]](#)

## **2.3 General Chapter 22[\[16\]](#) (1984)**

### ***Ecclesial and social context***

General Chapter 22 took place almost twenty years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council and twelve years after the CGS, periods that had generated an intense phase of experimentation and deepening of the Salesian identity in the new conciliar horizon.

The passage of time had helped to calm minds and to address the pressing need for renewal with greater clarity and less impulsiveness.

We can affirm – albeit with the awareness that the closer we get to the present, the greater the risk of subjective interpretations – that in those years a qualitative transformation took place in the experience of the religious, both on an individual and institutional level. The unstable and chaotic situation of the previous decades gave way to a more serene, but no less incisive determination to persevere in the commitment to a renewed Church and a more just world, in the knowledge that these changes would not happen quickly. Thus began a second phase of renewal for the Congregation. The substantial flow of exits was already diminishing. Some of the particular apostolic experiences, certain lifestyles and personal modes of organisation were abandoned, while what was working was consolidated and energies redirected.

It is difficult to pinpoint a specific event that accelerated this almost imperceptible change. The reality is that suddenly new 'leadership' emerged, in some cases with extraordinary personalities. Chapters and provincial assemblies began to be more proactive, enthusiasm returned to many brothers, and religious life was once again perceived as a viable and meaningful alternative.

***Challenges to be met: Concluding the renewal project.***

- Define the guidelines that would guide the future of the Congregation in the conciliar orbit.
- Elaborate a clear, up-to-date, and demanding vocational project, capable of safeguarding the Salesian identity in facing the complex challenges of the times. Hence the importance for the New Constitutions to express the experience of apostolic holiness already lived at Valdocco, through substantial continuity and dynamic fidelity between the text desired by Don Bosco and the fruit of GC22.

***Choices made: Final approval of the new Rule of Life.***

The final result of the chapter work represented – in the words of the Rector Major – “an organic text, profound, improved, permeated with the Gospel, rich in the genuineness of the origins, open to universality and leaning towards the future, sober and dignified, dense with balanced realism and assimilation of the conciliar principles. It is a text rethought communally in fidelity to Don Bosco and in response to the challenges of the times.”[\[17\]](#)

In fact, the new constitutional text placed in the first part, dedicated to the identity and role of Salesians in the Church, two fundamental chapters on the Salesian spirit and religious profession. The second part articulated the three inseparable elements of the Salesian vocation: mission, the life of communion and the practice of the evangelical counsels. This definitively overcame the tendency to emphasise the primacy of one of the three aspects to the detriment of the others. This part concluded with the chapter on the prayer life. The third part, devoted to formation, and the fourth, on the service of authority, retained their original structure.[\[18\]](#)

In this way we were able to faithfully outline a concrete type of life, the experience of Don Bosco and the first Salesians, capable of inspiring and guiding our project of “*seuela Christi*” for the young. This renewed constitutional text condenses the spiritual doctrine, pastoral criteria, original traditions and norms of life, that is, our own character and our specific itinerary of holiness. As Fr. Viganò pointed out in the Introduction to the Operational Guidelines, “the real documents of the XXII General

Chapter are the texts of the **Constitutions** and **General Regulations**".

The final drafting of the Rule of Life involved, among other things, the renewal of the **Ratio**, which had to integrate the new Code of Canon Law and the new Constitutions, while incorporating the contribution of the human sciences. The central idea was that the entire formation of Salesians should be consistent with the nature of their vocation and specific mission as educators and pastors of the young.

The Congregation could thus inaugurate a new phase in its history: making the transition 'from paper to life'.

## **2.4 General Chapter 23[19] (1990)**

### ***Ecclesial and social context***

At the end of the long and fruitful post-Conciliar period, dedicated to the broad redefinition of the Salesian identity in the Church and its consequent practical application, the Congregation was called to verify the effectiveness of Salesian education in the faith formation of the young people with whom it worked, and to actualize the educative-pastoral projects of the Provinces and houses.

On the world stage, humanity was witnessing the collapse of communism and the configuration of a new political order characterised by the emergence of a single superpower that would elevate economics to absolute value. With the disappearance of political, economic and social bipolarity, a new cultural sensibility also began to emerge. During the General Chapter, however, the analysis of social reality had limited relevance, emerging mainly through its impact on young people.

"In recent years, there has been a crisis of ideologies and strong, driving ideas. In their place appeared the weak thinking of postmodernity, characterised both by respect for and openness to all currents of cultures, and by ethical relativism, subjectivism, and social fragmentation... For young people, unemployment, the disintegration of many families, the widespread phenomenon of secularism, religious indifference, as well as that of a new religiosity in the fashion of the *new age* became more worrying." [20]

The reality of youth was therefore very complex, varied and challenging. The need therefore emerged to know and understand in depth the contexts in which young people lived – or struggled to live – and in which they were called to realise their

human and religious growth, contexts in which Salesians had to accompany them:

- Contexts characterised by the abundance of material goods.
- Contexts marked by economic, political, and cultural impoverishment.
- Contexts influenced by the presence of ancient and great religions.
- Contexts in which an irreversible process of independence from colonialism was underway.
- Contexts in exodus from authoritarian regimes to different systems of social and political life.
- Indigenous community and ethnic minority contexts.

### ***Challenges to be met: educating young people in the faith***

The theme arose from the experience of previous years, from the difficulties encountered by both the young people and the Salesian community, but also from the promise of fidelity to Don Bosco, renewed on 14 May 1988 in the centenary celebration of his death.

It was realised that educating young people in the faith was becoming an increasingly complex mission in all areas of Salesian presence, a consequence of an emerging culture that demanded a rethinking of both the methodology and content of education in the faith.

This commitment required never losing sight of the 'unifying and enlightening' function of faith and, therefore, recovering it, proposing it, and knowing how to make it meaningful for young people as a vital element for the integral maturation of the person.

It meant taking on the task of educating young people in the values of human dignity, of overcoming selfishness, of reconciliation, of Christian greatness, of being able to forgive and feel forgiven.

It was about making love grow by forming the minds and hearts of young people so that they could clearly perceive the supreme centrality of the Eucharist in the Christian life.

Finally, it involved knowing how to interpret and present the meaning of life as a vocation, in the awareness that each young person represents a human project to be discovered and constructed in the light of the consciousness of being 'the image of God'.

### **Choices made: Proposal of youth spirituality**

Starting from the challenges posed by the reality of youth in its various contexts, the capitulars outlined a path of faith education for young people, offering them a proposal for a meaningful Christian life and Salesian youth spirituality.

GC23 chose to consider the recipient of the Salesian mission as the mature fruit of its educative commitment, presenting him or her as a young person educated in the faith, who chooses life, who goes out to meet Jesus, who actively participates in the ecclesial community, and who discovers his or her place in the Kingdom, with a special focus on the “formation of conscience, education to love, and the social dimension of faith” (GC23, 182-214).

It was, therefore, not a question of downsizing the works (although this was an important task), but of rethinking and renewing the mission, that is, the quality of the educational-pastoral proposal. The objective was less to create new presences and more to create *a new presence, an innovative way of being present* where work was already being done.

Once again, the Congregation felt called to relaunch with all its energy the attitude of “*da mihi animas*”, witnessed by Don Bosco with pastoral originality, transforming communities into “a sign of faith, a school of faith and a centre of communion” (GC23, 215-218).

## **2.5 General Chapter 24<sup>[21]</sup> (1996)**

### ***Ecclesial and social context***

General Chapter 24 took place within three significant ecclesial events that profoundly influenced its development: firstly, the challenge of the *New Evangelisation*, initiated by the Second Vatican Council and subsequently taken up by John Paul II as a pastoral programme; secondly, the Synod for the Laity, which exhorted them to live their baptismal vocation with greater commitment in both the ecclesial and social spheres, principles later codified in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*; lastly, the Synod on “Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World”, which updated the conciliar doctrine on religious life by adapting it to the new cultural demands, all expressed in the enlightening document *Vita consecrata*, full of positive consequences.

On a global level, history was witnessing the emergence of a new economic, political, social, and cultural scenario, following the events that marked the end of

the East-West conflict. Several trends were already exerting a considerable influence on Salesian life and action:

- The primacy of economics, supported by neo-liberalism, resulting in the impoverishment of much of the world.
- The ambivalence of communication that, on the one hand, fostered integration between countries and, on the other, caused profound cultural changes.
- The loss of the privileged role of the family and education in the formation of the person, in the face of the growing power of other educational agents and other modes of family organisation.
- The growing importance of women in society and the need for more attention to the female specific.
- The resurgence of a multiple face of the religious phenomenon required a deeper spirituality and a focus on ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

***Challenges to be met: creating synergy between SDB and collaborators***

They aspired to multiply the number of people willing to live out their baptism in the field of education and culture, revaluing secular reality itself as an authentic theological place.

It was necessary to verify and re-launch the 'lay project' according to the requirements of *Lumen Gentium* (chapter IV), *Gaudium et Spes*, the decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* and the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, in tune with Don Bosco, who had understood the fundamental importance of sharing his youth and popular mission with a vast movement of people.

The intention was to bring Salesians and lay people together in a new paradigm of relations, within an ecclesiology of communion, not so much to compensate for the diminishing number of Salesians as to achieve greater complementarity in the common mission.

It was essential to orientate the Salesians towards their priority task: to give priority to pastoral and pedagogical animation, and to devote themselves with greater commitment to the formation of co-workers and co-responsibles, over and above any other commitment.

The intention was to initiate a common formative path between Salesians and lay people centred on Don Bosco's spirit and mission, to foster an authentic exchange of gifts.

It was essential to revalue the secular dimension of the Congregation, expressed in the choice for the field of culture, education and human promotion of needy youth, with a special cultural sensitivity for the working classes. It was vital and promising to be able to share commitments in the field of culture and education with people who cultivated secular values 'from within'.

### ***Choices made: Involving and training lay collaborators***

A distinguishing feature of General Chapter 24 was the active presence, for the first time at an event of this nature, of 21 lay people. The conviction took root more and more that the new evangelisation and education could not be achieved without the organic and qualified collaboration of the laity. Salesian communities now had to equip themselves to become the "animating nucleus" of an educative-pastoral community and the dynamizing centre of the Salesian Family, where Salesians, lay people and members of the Salesian Family could fully share Don Bosco's spirit and mission. This had important consequences:

- Qualify the formation of the laity, helping them to grow in the grace of unity, a central element of Don Bosco's spirit, which maintains a harmonious tension between faith and the world, God and man, mystery and history. Only in this way could horizontalism and verticalism, secularism and spiritualism be overcome (Cf. *Christifideles laici* 59).
- Extend the involvement of the laity in works, with a personal and communitarian attitude that bears witness to their baptismal fraternity and common apostolic responsibility, trusting in the commitments entrusted to them.
- At the Salesian Family level, promote co-responsibility, creating spaces for participation and strengthening communication.

## **2.6 General Chapter 25[22] (2002)**

### ***Ecclesial and social context***

The most relevant social and cultural phenomenon of those years was, without a doubt, individualism, which manifested itself not only on the economic level – in its neo-liberal guise – or in politics, but above all in everyday life: "To be oneself, to live freely without repression, to choose one's own way of life, are the aspirations and the right that our contemporaries consider to be the most legitimate." [23]

This culture of subjectivity, strongly focused on personal freedom and responsibility, made the transition to a culture of communion more difficult. This was as true for the ecclesial sphere, where many of the faithful understood faith as a private fact, as it was for religious life, in which there was a growing dichotomy between the

desire for communion – understood as acceptance of

the person and deep interpersonal relationships – and the ‘satiety’ of community life, which relativised common practices.

There was, at the same time, a widespread sense of loneliness and a strong need for encounter and sharing, especially evident in the world of youth and the Church; in this context, fraternity could stand as a sign of hope and prophecy.

***Challenges to be met: creating a model of community that is humanly meaningful, pastorally prophetic, vocationally attractive, and purposeful.***

The new pastoral model, which saw an increasing presence of the laity in the tasks of animation and governance of the works, required a community style capable of raising questions: how should the community be structured so that it would be visibly evangelical, authentically fraternal, animating and vocationally convoking?

Hence the need to revive in each one the consciousness of being called to live fraternity in Christ with greater meaning, joy and transparency as a response to the deep aspirations of our hearts, so that, in the midst of young people, we might truly bear witness to God’s love and become centres of spiritual animation for CEP and the Salesian Family.

At the same time, an imbalance emerged between the quantity – and complexity – of the works and the personnel resources: the decrease and ageing of the Salesians contrasted with the growth of the works and the multiplication of the structures. This resulted in physical tiredness, psychological stress, and spiritual superficiality on a personal level, as well as division and fragmentation of the community project, which rendered many educative-pastoral efforts sterile.

The Congregation therefore found itself discerning new ways of community life capable of responding to the demands of the *sequela Christi* and the mission. The objective was to determine concrete conditions that would allow the consecrated apostolic fraternity to be lived dynamically and effectively.

### ***Choices made***

The decisions taken were aimed at achieving what Father Vecchi indicated as the “main and terminal goal” of GC 25: “to find effective ways to re-motivate



communities to manifest their religious identity with simplicity and clarity in new situations; to determine the essential conditions or criteria that allow, or rather stimulate, our professed fraternity to live in a joyful, humanly meaningful way, following Christ.”[\[24\]](#)

## **2.7 General Chapter 26 (2008)**

GC 26 focused on the theme ‘*Da mihi animas, coetera tolle*’: Charismatic identity and apostolic passion.

The fundamental objective of General Chapter 26 was to strengthen our charismatic identity through a return to Don Bosco, reawakening in the heart of each brother the passion of “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”.

The determination and commitment to start afresh from the founder are not a sign of crisis, but rather a criterion of authenticity and fidelity, rooted in the conviction that in his charisma and in

his life resides not only the elements that inspired the past, but also those that reveal themselves as prophecy for the future.

To achieve such an objective, a deeper knowledge of Don Bosco was first of all necessary. There was a serious risk of breaking the vital links that held us united to him: more than a century had already passed since his death and the Salesians of the first generations who had met him in person had died out. The chronological, geographical, and cultural distance from the founder was widening, depriving us of that spiritual climate and psychological closeness that allowed a spontaneous reference to Don Bosco and his spirit. If we had not revived our roots, we would have risked having no future and no right to citizenship. This is why it was necessary to study him, love him, imitate him, and invoke him: to know him as a master of life, to whose spirituality we drew as children and disciples; as a founder, who showed us the path of vocational fidelity; as an educator, who left us as a precious inheritance the “preventive system”; and as a legislator, because the Constitutions, which he directly and then Salesian history elaborated, offered us a charismatic reading of the Gospel and the following of Christ.

The call to return to the young – our mission, our reason, our homeland – always remained urgent, so that we could be among them with greater competence. It is true that, even then, we struggled to keep up with the young, to understand their

culture, and to love their world; yet the true Salesian did not desert the youth field. A Salesian was one who possessed a vital knowledge of the young: his heart beat where the young people's heart beat. He lived for them, he existed for their problems, their expectations, their dreams.

### ***The challenges they wanted to respond to***

At the level of fundamental tendencies, it was necessary to recognise the existence of two 'transversal dynamics' characterising the epochal change we are currently experiencing: on the one hand, a tendency towards cultural homogeneity, which seeks to replicate the Western model by eliminating differences; on the other hand, religiously motivated cultural contrasts leading to a growing differentiation, for example, between Islam and the West, between secularised society and Christianity.

From the economic point of view, there is the universal spread of the neo-liberal model, based on the market system, which tends to prevail over the other human values of people and peoples. From the cultural point of view, a process of homologation of cultures towards the Western model is imposing itself, with the gradual dissolution of the cultural and political peculiarities of peoples.

The impact of the media and the information technology revolution generate profound changes in customs, wealth distribution, work organisation, through a media culture and an information society.

On a social and cultural level, a strong trend towards 'human mobility' emerges, manifested by masses migrating to countries of wealth and prosperity. The 'challenge of poverty', hunger, disease, and underdevelopment persist, along with the problems arising from the exploitation of children and minors in the tragic forms of marginalisation, child labour, sex tourism, begging, street children, juvenile delinquency, child soldiers, and infant mortality. A 'consumerist mentality' spreads everywhere, in rich and developing countries alike.

Of course, challenges also arise from within the Congregation itself, and they are of a different nature: the ageing of the confreres in some areas, the disparity in the living conditions of the Salesians compared to contexts of poverty and misery. There is also a different impact of the youth culture, with its attitudes and life models, on the personal and community life of the members; the difficulty of dealing with a world of youth that is extremely

varied in terms of ideas and behaviour; the different emphases in the relationship between education and evangelisation; the different sensitivities regarding the social impact of our mission of human promotion. In some places spiritual superficiality, pastoral genericism, remoteness from the world of youth, problems relating to the inculturation of the charism, poor knowledge of Don Bosco and his work persist.

### **Choices made**

- Urgency to evangelise, to pro-voke and con-voke young people to follow Christ in the footsteps of Don Bosco.
- Determined orientation towards new frontiers: commitment to 'poor youth', 'family', and presence as critical interlocutors in social communication.
- Initiating 'new models' of management capable of supporting the Salesian mission with flexibility and agility.
- Finally, caring and diligent attention to the revitalisation of the 'Salesian presence in Europe'.

## **2.8 General Chapter 27 (2014)**

GC 27 adopted 'Witnesses of Gospel Radicality' as its theme

It intended to guide us towards a deeper understanding of our charismatic identity, making us aware of our vocation to live faithfully Don Bosco's apostolic project. *Radicality of life was Don Bosco's inner nerve*; it fuelled his tireless dedication to the salvation of the young and allowed the Congregation to flourish.[\[25\]](#)

Radical is that disciple who allows himself to be fascinated by Christ and, consequently, is prepared to abandon everything (cf. Mt 19:21-22) in order to identify with Him, "taking on His feelings and His way of life". Radical is that apostle who, like Paul, "gave up all these things and considered them rubbish, in order to gain Christ" (Phil 3:8). Indeed, only a full conversion *in Christ*[\[26\]](#), that is, a *complete identification with the person and mission of Jesus*, guarantees "the most radical way of living the gospel on this earth".[\[27\]](#) This, in turn, generates a renewed drive for evangelisation: those who, like Jesus, have only God and his kingdom as their cause, represent ('re-present') him reliably and credibly.[\[28\]](#)

As Rector Major, I had emphasised that for us Salesians, "personal and communal witness to evangelical radicality is not simply an aspect that sits alongside others, but rather a fundamental dimension of our life. "It cannot be reduced to the practice

of the evangelical counsels alone. It involves our whole being, embracing its essential components: the following of Christ, fraternal life in community, mission".[\[29\]](#) And concretely, "to face the present and future challenges of Salesian consecrated life and mission throughout the Congregation, there emerges the need to outline the *profile of the new Salesian*"[\[30\]](#) , called to be: *mystic*, recognising the absolute primacy of God; *prophet*, living in and for the evangelical fraternity; *servant*, dedicating himself entirely to accompanying and caring for the poorest and neediest young people.

Here are the **choices**, we are called to be today:

– *Mystics*: in a world that feels increasingly clearly challenged by secularism, we must "find an answer in the *recognition of the absolute primacy of God*" through "the total gift of self" and in "permanent conversion to a life offered as true spiritual worship".[\[31\]](#)

– *Prophets*: "In the multicultural and multireligious context, there is a demand for a witness of *evangelical fraternity*." Our religious communities are called to courageously live the gospel as an alternative form of life and "a stimulus to purify and integrate different values through the reconciliation of divisions."[\[32\]](#)

– *Servants*: "The presence of new forms of poverty and marginalisation must arouse that creativity in caring for those most in need"[\[33\]](#) , which characterised the birth of our Congregation and will also mark the rebirth of our Provinces, for the benefit of the poorest young people and those marginalised for economic, sexual, racial or religious reasons.

## **2.9 General Chapter 28 (2020)**

**GC 28 had as its theme "Which Salesian for the youth of today?"**

We know very well how Covid-19 profoundly affected this General Chapter, which remained, for the first time in history, unfinished and without an official chapter document, due to the urgency of concluding the work early.

The Rector Major, Fr Àngel Fernández Artime, in presenting the **Chapter Reflections** that open with the programmatic lines, wrote with intensity: "I believe that the document you now have in your hands will enable us to deepen the ecclesial, charismatic, and identity motivations that will help us to continue on the

path of fidelity that, as a Congregation and in a personal way, we wish to continue. Today, our world, the Church and the young people together with their families, need us as they did yesterday, to continue living a path of fidelity to the Lord Jesus. They need us as *meaningful and courageously prophetic* persons. May the Lord grant us this gift. With mediocrity and fear, we can offer young people few things, which cannot transform their lives and fill them with meaning” (RM presentation, p.10, original emphasis).

What the Rector Major did, together with his Council, was to carefully collate what had been worked out during the days of the Chapter, integrating both the work that had been started but not completed, what had been prepared by the *Drafting Commission*, and the valuable pre-Chapter work of the Provinces.

**The objective**, in the words of the Rector Major himself, was “to become **a programme of action for the next six years**, *in absolute continuity with the path previously travelled by the Congregation* and which, also for this reason, gives us strength and courage” (Programmatic lines... p. 15, personal emphasis). In the light of what the Rector Major presents to us in his “*Chapter Reflections*” at the conclusion of GC28, **the Salesian for the youth of today** is called upon to:

1. Reaffirm the **centrality of the mission** (C.3), which does not consist simply in works or activities but in being authentic “*witnesses and bearers of God’s love for the young, especially the poorest and most abandoned*” (C.2). This vocation must be visibly manifested, as already indicated by **GC23**, which had outlined the Salesian as a “pastor-educator of the young”.
2. To fully recover the awareness that **the mission is lived in community**, the true subject of the mission (C.49), and must therefore be lived with a deep sense of belonging and participation, since it is the community itself that sends each brother and entrusts him with specific roles and tasks, in line with what was requested by **GC 25**, which aimed to renew the Congregation through the renewal of the Community.
3. Recognise that mission today is carried out **in co-responsibility with the laity**, giving rise to an authentic ‘**new pastoral subject**’, as already urged by **GC24**, which called for a change of mentality in the Salesian so that he would share with the laity not only the work, but also the spirit and the mission.

All this required **placing oneself in a 'state of lifelong learning'** in order to

- a. Grow in **charismatic identity**, as required by **GC26**;
- b. Ensuring **apostolic interiority**;
- c. Achieving the **grace of unity**, as the **GC27** had hoped, by tracing a profile of the Salesian as 'mystic in the spirit', 'prophet of communion', 'servant of the young'.

Here are the **Programmatic Guidelines** that define, in the manner of a 'real roadmap', the Congregation's path for the coming years:

1. **Salesians from Don Bosco forever.** A sessennial to grow in the Salesian identity (*returning to Christ as consecrated: taking on Jesus' obedient, poor, and chaste way of life – returning to Don Bosco as Salesians: identification with Don Bosco's apostolic project, the Constitutions*).
2. In a Congregation where we are invited by the "**da mihi animas, coetera tolle**" (translated into a renewed commitment to evangelisation – *priority of the first proclamation in tune with "Evangelii Gaudium"*).
3. Living the '**Salesian sacrament of presence**' (*renewed assistance characterised by presence – listening – accompanying [Letter from Rome and Christus Vivit]*).
4. Formation to be **Salesian pastors today** (*formation for and in mission: towards an ever-increasing awareness of ongoing formation and of the fact that the community is the privileged place, guaranteeing quality to the entire process*).
5. **Absolute priority** for the young, the poorest, the most abandoned and defenceless (an imperative all the more necessary in the context of the current economic and social crisis. It is a choice that admits no exceptions, because *it is not ideological but charismatic*).
6. **Together with the laity in mission and formation.** The charismatic strength offered by the laity and the Salesian Family (*communion or sense of belonging and participation or sense of co-responsibility for charism and mission*).
7. It is time for **greater generosity in the congregation.** A universal and missionary congregation (*it concretely requires total availability for its service or mission needs*).

8. Accompanying young people towards a **sustainable future** (*'green alliance'*; *this is not a simple defence of 'ecosystems', but the promotion of an 'integral ecology' from the perspective of *Laudato si**).

The inspiring and unifying element in all this articulation was **Pope Francis' Message to the members of GC28** and his pressing *invitation to revive Don Bosco's charism*.

In a word, it's about **getting back to Valdocco**:

- the 'Valdocco option' and the gift of youth;
- the 'Valdocco option' and the charism of presence;
- the 'Valdocco option' in the plurality of languages (multiculturalism);
- the 'Valdocco option' and the ability to dream.

**Ultimately, this means reviving Don Bosco's charism, "to be other Don Bosco today", so as to be able to respond with creative and dynamic fidelity to the new challenges of mission and the young people of our time.**

## **2.10 General Chapter 29 (2025)**

GC29 adopted as its theme 'Passionate for Christ – dedicated to Youth' *for a faithful and prophetic living of our Salesian vocation*.

This Chapter was influenced in no small measure by the appointment of Rector Major Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime as a Cardinal of the Holy Church, which took place in the middle of the sessennium, with significant consequences, including the convening of GC29 being brought forward by a year.

As required by the Constitutions, the Chapter was initially presided over by the Vicar Fr. Stefano Martoglio, until the election of the new Rector Major in the person of Fr. Fabio Attard. The latter, although not originally a Chapter member, wisely guided the work until its conclusion.

Despite these special circumstances, the Chapter deepened the three thematic nuclei considered of fundamental importance by the Rector Major:

- 'Animating and caring for the true life of each Salesian';
- 'Together Salesians, Salesian Family, and Laity 'with' and 'for' young people';
- "A courageous review and redesign of the governance of the congregation at all levels".

The historical *context* in which the Chapter took place was a dramatic page in contemporary history, characterised by a tense geopolitical situation, with numerous ongoing conflicts and the growing danger of a nuclear war. At the same time, the Church was after the “Synod for a Synodal Path” and the Jubilee of Hope. For the congregation, this period coincided with the celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first missionary expedition and with a profound change in the face of the increasingly multicultural Congregation.

*The deliberations* adopted by the Chapter Assembly, in keeping with the general theme and the three thematic nuclei, were articulated in the final document:

### ***Salesians passionate about Jesus Christ and committed to Youth***

The theme chosen by Rector Major Fr. Ángel Fernández for our Chapter touches on the very essence of Christian and religious life: being conquered by the love of Christ to the point of placing God at the centre of our existence. Consecrated life is, in its entirety, marked by love and must be lived under the banner of this love. It cannot be authentically embraced except in joy, even in times of trial and difficulty, with the conviction and enthusiasm of those who have love as the driving force of their lives. From this root spring the serenity, luminosity and fruitfulness of consecrated life, qualities that make it fascinating and attractive to the young people to whom we are sent and to whom, by vocation, we are entirely dedicated.

In his message to the members of GC29, Pope Francis commented on the theme: “It is a beautiful programme: to be ‘passionate’ and ‘handed over’, to let oneself be fully involved by the love of the Lord and to serve others without keeping anything for oneself, just as your Founder did in his time. Even if today, compared to then, the challenges have changed somewhat, the faith and enthusiasm remain the same, enriched with new gifts, such as that of interculturality.”

This reflection inevitably leads us to the ‘*passion of God*’ manifested in the Crucified Christ – an expression that encompasses both the infinite and immeasurable love of Christ (‘passion’ as *an expression of a great love*), and his immense suffering, the result of the betrayal of one of His own, the abandonment of all the disciples, the denial of the leader of the ‘twelve’, the rejection of the people, the condemnation of the religious leaders, the crucifixion at the hands of the Romans, and the apparent silence of God (‘passion’ as *an expression of suffering for love*). Not surprisingly, then, there is no more eloquent symbol than the ‘passion’ – understood as both love and suffering – of the crucified Christ.



The reason is very clear: only by recognising and feeling infinitely loved by the Father in Christ can we be conquered by Him and become capable of authentically loving others – the brethren, the young people, all the people who work with us in the mission.

It is precisely this divine ‘pathos’ that led Paul to confess: “I am crucified with Christ. It is not I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I live in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God who **loved me** and **gave himself up for me.**” (Gal 2:19-20)

It is only when we are **conquered by the passion** (love and suffering) of Christ that we can become genuinely **passionate**, capable of total love and self-giving.

***First core: ‘Animation and care for the true life of each Salesian’***

- Resolutely renew the centrality of Jesus Christ, rediscovering the grace of unity and shunning spiritual superficiality.
- Revitalise fraternal life in communities and strengthen service to the poorest young people as an authentic expression of the Salesian charism.
- Renew formative processes by taking care of accompaniment and formation in the mission.

***Second Core: ‘Together Salesians, Salesian Family, and lay people ‘with’ and ‘for’ young people’***

- Sharing spirituality, mission, and formation with lay people and members of the Salesian Family in each educating community.
- Offer gradual and systematic itineraries of faith education and renew the practice of the Preventive System, ensuring safe environments everywhere.
- Being present in the new frontiers of mission: the digital environment, integral ecology, new expressions of the charism.

***The third core contains the Resolutions approved by the Chapter.*** Some of them amend articles of the Constitutions or Regulations, others require the Rector Major and his Council to pay special attention to issues of particular importance. These resolutions represent the fruit of a wide-ranging and articulate reflection, which also embraced issues that had been left pending by the 28<sup>th</sup> General Chapter due to its early conclusion. Not all the issues examined were translated into resolutions or obtained the necessary consensus to generate institutional changes, but they nevertheless contributed to the “courageous verification and redesigning

of the governance of the Congregation at all levels” called for in the letter of convocation.

### **3. Evaluation and future prospects**

#### **3.1 Evaluation**

The Second Vatican Council has undoubtedly exerted an influence on Salesian life and mission. This is not the place to present an exhaustive analysis of all the transformations that have taken place within the Congregation during these sixty years, nor am I sure that such a work has already been done. I will therefore limit myself to highlighting some transformations that I consider particularly significant.

*The mission has undergone a remarkable change*, described with particular effectiveness by Fr. Vecchi who, in his years as Councilor for Youth Ministry, experienced this process first hand: ‘The image of the Salesians at the beginning of this evolution is that of a Congregation firmly established in the youth field with well-defined educative structures: schools, vocational centres, boarding schools, oratories; which develops within these structures different pedagogical ‘lines’ according to a secure praxis: religious pedagogy, school pedagogy, associative pedagogy, work pedagogy, leisure pedagogy. The preparation of personnel and the roles of guidance and governance corresponded to the fields of work. They also corresponded to general objectives, organisation of content, choice of target groups, and even an interpretation of the social context and the role the educative task should play in it. The image, after twenty years of journeying (1970-1990), is of a Congregation open to multiple fields of work, in environments in which new educational and pastoral demands under the banner of ‘complexity’ are constantly appearing; which plans varied and at times unprecedented interventions; which is faced with the urgency of adapting, balancing, and making the members’ skills interact, of reformulating its programmes and giving consistency to certain intuitions.”[\[34\]](#)

Consequently, *the structures of animation and governance* also underwent changes, not only to better respond to the needs of the new pastoral work, but to guarantee the identity of the charism and its inculturation, unity and decentralisation, autonomy and subsidiarity.

*The life of communion* has grown in the dimension of fraternity, respect for the

person, the exercise of authority, the depth of interpersonal relationships, and co-responsibility in decision-making processes.

Prompted by internal and external stimuli, *formation* has outlined more precisely the profile of the Salesian it intends to form, the conditions and methodology that make possible his progressive identification with Don Bosco, the ultimate reference of Salesian formation.

From this perspective, it can be said that the Congregation has been faithful to the demands of the Church, the world and culture, as well as to the ever-changing needs of young people, seeking to respond with fidelity and creativity.

However, in order to avoid falling into facile optimism and to verify whether the renewal called for by the Second Vatican Council has not been limited to a mere formal '*renovatio accomodata*', but has really reached deep into people's minds and hearts, I consider it appropriate to propose a broader evaluation of the post-conciliar phenomenon in religious life. In this way we will be able to complete the general picture, highlight the tasks that are still incomplete, and outline future prospects.

It is widely believed that in the period prior to the Second Vatican Council it was relatively easy to 'identify' religious, their form of life, and their place in the Church. Religious life was characterised by the perpetual profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, according to the Constitutions of a Congregation approved by ecclesiastical authority. Religious resided in religious houses, convents or monasteries, and were distinguished, inside and outside their institutes, by the habit they wore. The lifestyle and clear recognition of the members separated them concretely from the 'world' and differentiated them from the 'laity' within the Church itself.[\[35\]](#)

As we have already observed, the Council initiated a change of Copernican proportions, involving and modifying all the institutions, invited to relocate themselves *within the Church 'in' the world (GS)*, according to a new ecclesiology of communion (LG) in which all the baptised constitute a single people of God with diversity of vocations, roles and charisms.

After the whole process of renewal, religious life has undergone such strong transformations that today it is difficult to 'identify' and even justify it as a form of

life. The difficulty does not stem primarily from the abandonment of the religious habit in favour of a more secular dress, but from a series of external and internal factors that have blurred the characteristic features of its identity. This explains today's insistence on recovering its 'visibility' and, consequently, its meaningfulness, credibility, and attractiveness.

We can say that religious life has been challenged externally by secularisation and internally by the loss of identity.

### **3.1.1 External Crisis**

It is undeniable that the most obvious sign of our times is the secularisation of society, which has reached such pronounced levels of secularism as to generate a culture of non-belief, a-religious and essentially atheistic.

"Until now, many social and cultural expressions were permeated by a religious dimension. On the other hand, the social irrelevance of what is religious has been growing, which makes the pace of maturation of the faith, as knowledge of its contents and, even more, as a practice of life, more difficult and longer. And this is true both for the youth of our works and for young Salesians in formation.

Being Christian – that is, living the baptismal option – in a pluralist society, becomes one social mode among many others, with the same right of citizenship. A climate of relativism, of blurring of traditional ideals, of loss of the meaning of life can thus emerge: many young people seem to float adrift on a boat without a compass. They lose the perspective of the transcendent, which is the goal of faith, and close themselves off in small answers on the meaning of life, which are totally insufficient for the great anxieties of the human heart. The very answers that science intends to offer them turn out to be deficient from the perspective of the search for meaning, because they do not refer to the ultimate purpose of life and the global meaning of history."[\[36\]](#)

This secularisation manifests itself in religious life with a triple face. Indeed, it can take the form of:

- a) Loss of transcendence: when faith as the horizon of life and vocation is reduced to a mere human project, and the consecration of man centred in God vanishes.[\[37\]](#)
- b) Anthropocentrism: it questions forms of interhuman community, types of love,

the existence of fruitful friendship that is not a function of sex and human life.

c) Socio-economic praxis: which leads one to live with passion the idea that man is realised in creative work aimed at dominating the world and producing the goods necessary for life, reducing the mission to a simple social commitment.

In my opinion, this secularised view of religious life has also been influenced by a rather reductive theological reading of the principle of the Incarnation, which has emphasised the first term, that of Irenaeus' "*quod non assumptum*", to the point of relegating to the background or completely neglecting the newness that comes to us from God through the Incarnation.

### **3.1.2 Internal Crisis**

Of course, the crisis of religious life does not arise exclusively from external factors, although we must recognise that these do condition it significantly, but emerges from within it, raising the following issues:

a) The problem of the biblical foundation: it would seem that religious life has no direct foundation in the Gospel, since what Jesus demanded is valid for all those who believe in Him.

b) The revalorisation of marriage: the sanctifying value that is increasingly recognised to human love could lead one to believe that religious life has lost its meaning, considering that every person is called to holiness, not only the religious.

c) Overcoming old structures: religious life has run the risk of confining its members in a network of precepts and absolute norms that do not always favour maturity and a life inspired by the freedom of God's children.[\[38\]](#)

### **3.1.3 Identity of Religious Life**

Faced with the current situation, we must ask ourselves sincerely what our task is. Instead of proclaiming the end or meaninglessness of religious life everywhere in the contemporary world, it is time to create or recreate those structures that better respond to the Gospel, that allow us to deepen the demands of fraternal love, apostolic witness, simplicity and giving of Jesus. In short, it is time to recover the specificity of religious life, that which can make it credible, effective and meaningful: the *sequela Christi*.

It is therefore indispensable to redefine the *identity of religious life*, which is not based on vows, nor on the Constitutions, nor on the habit, nor even on the mission, but on the **religious themselves and their special relationship with Christ**. It is about understanding what a religious is, because religious have 'something special' to offer the world and the Church, and it is in that 'something special' that their significance lies.[\[39\]](#)

For a time, we considered that our identity was to be found in the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. However, we know that "the evangelical life" is not exclusive to religious.

The habit and the observance of certain rules of life offered a recognisable type of identity in the past, and the loss of these elements in recent years has been painful for many. Yet, regardless of one's personal stance – liberal, conservative or moderate – it is clear that religious people should not seek their identity in outward signs.

Many believe that the identity of religious life stems from the apostolate that a community carries out in the world and in the Church. However, even in this case, we must be realistic: the work we do can be done by lay people. Indeed, lay people are often more professional than religious, who find that even here there is that "something special" that religious life is called to offer the Church and society.

To define the identity of religious life we need to turn to the God who has called us: the God of Jesus, the God of the New Testament, the **God-Love**. Jesus Word (*Logos*), i.e. his whole life, and his words constitute the revelation of God and the foundation of religious life. Rather than searching Scripture for texts that justify religious life, it is necessary to look at and contemplate Jesus, who inaugurated a new way of being human. The Gospel of John expresses this masterfully with a series of texts that form a '*continuum*':

– We have come to know the *Father's* love in the sending of his Son, precisely because he loves the world and does not want its death but its life (cf. Jn 3:16).

– *Jesus of Nazareth* is the son who loved his own to the extreme (cf. Jn 13:1) and offered Himself in the greatest act of love for them: to give His own life so that they might have it in abundance (cf. Jn 15:13).

- Jesus' *disciples* must love one another to show the world that they are his disciples (cf. Jn 13:35).

- *Christians*, in turn, who hear of this God-Love through the preaching of the disciples, must be **one** in love "so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me" (cf. Jn 17:27).

- In short, the *Christian life* must necessarily be distinguished by the quality of love, so as to manifest and be a witness to the God who is Love (cf. 1 John 4:7-12).

Perfection in love is thus the vocation of every Christian and every human being. And this is also the mission of religious in the context of the universal call to holiness.

The task of the religious community, at the heart of the Church, is not to acquire a *surplus* of holiness or perfection over non-religious, but *to ensure that this good news of the God-Love preached becomes a concrete reality*. To this they publicly commit themselves by vow, and this mission - with the responsibility to incarnate it in their lives - is accepted by the Christian community.

Therefore, only a life characterised by love will have the strength to reveal itself and become credible, as the summaries of the life of the Jerusalem community show (Acts 2:42-48; 4:32-35; 5:12-16), and will provoke in others the question of the why of our life. Then the only possible and valid answer will be: "because of the God in whom we believe".[\[40\]](#)

### **3.2 Prospects for the future**

Looking back over the journey of the Congregation, we have already observed that change has not always been linear or peaceful, but subject, as is natural, to verification, correction, and refinement. The strongest resistance has never been towards the renewal of the Constitutions or governmental structures, or even pastoral practices, but rather towards spiritual renewal that involved, and continues to involve today more than yesterday, a profound conversion.

The sixty years of transformations have shaped a new form of Salesian religious life and we already have *new wineskins* (we have a new evangelisation, a new school, a new education, a new pastoral model, a new formation). Gradually the *new wine* has also been produced (the new evangeliser, the new educator, the new pastoral

agent, the new Salesian).

Perhaps sometimes we feel uncomfortable with the use of the adjective 'new' to qualify realities we thought we knew, especially because of the practical consequences this entails: the need to renew ourselves spiritually, update ourselves professionally, and qualify ourselves pedagogically. However, novelty is not, at least in this case, a quest for snobbery, but rather a respect for the newness of contexts, realities, and human beings. It is evident that today we are confronted with a culturally new man. This means that novelty is imposed on us from outside and challenges us.

Today, the concern of religious life in general, and of the Congregation in particular, cannot be to survive, but to create a meaningful and effective presence. It is therefore not a matter of survival, but of prophecy. We must be *signs of* a God who is not the enemy but the promoter of man, who is the origin of a *new humanity* founded on love (cf. C.62). "This implies giving life to a presence that raises questions, gives reasons for hope, summons people, arouses collaboration, activates an ever more fruitful communion, in order to realise together a project of life and action according to the Gospel."[\[41\]](#)

In short, what is desired is a form of life that prioritises the prophetic dimension, that privileges people more than structures, that is fascinating and attractive.

Paraphrasing Fr Karl Rahner in his spiritual testament, we can say that the future of religious life passes through its mystical strength, its sharp and steadfast experience and witness to God, overcoming all forms of boredom, apathy, and mediocrity. Religious life arose and has meaning only as a sign of the search for God and as a testimony of having found Him. Otherwise, it perverts and, instead of being a life project, is reduced to a state of life, devoid of dynamism and relevance.

Its mission is to be a metaphor and symbol (**signs and bearers of God's love**, especially in favour of those most in need, to experience that God exists, that He loves them, and that God is Love), combining openness to all that is good, lovable, noble and free, with contemplation, and a commitment to approach the excluded and those who fight for the dignity of the human person.

When the General Superiors decided to tackle the theme of the *re-foundation of religious life*[\[42\]](#), they were moved by the awareness that there is a need for 'new



wine' for 'new wineskins'. It would almost seem to be an echo of the appeal launched by the Second Vatican Council, with the difference that now the request is more pressing and resonates from within as an urgent call to return to the origins of the Congregation and to recover its 'originality'; to go towards the essential, where the 'mission' is not reduced to works nor identified with activity that sometimes, instead of revealing, veils and conceals deep meanings and motivations.

The images of 'light', 'salt' and 'leaven', used by Jesus in the Gospel to define the nature and mission of the disciples, are revealing and challenging. One simply has to 'be' to have meaning and relevance. But if salt loses its flavour, or if light is put under the bushel, or if yeast has no strength to ferment, they are of no use. They have lost their reason for being.

The strength of religious life is rooted in its counter-cultural character, subversive to gentrification and development that is unlimited but devoid of transcendence. Once again, the problem is one of *identity and identification*, no longer dependent on the habit or structures, but on a strong experience of God that profoundly transforms and revolutionizes our lives, and on a community where we begin to live with newness of life and with alternative models to the dominant culture.

"Do not be conformed to the mentality of this age," Paul wrote to the Romans, "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect to him" (12:2).

In this same vein, I would like to conclude by outlining *five perspectives for the future*, which have already been the subject of profound reflection and study by the last Major Rectors in their letters. These areas are still in need of renewal in order to embark on this new historical phase, full of significant challenges but also extraordinary opportunities, with renewed energy and planning clarity:

1. *The spiritual renewal of every Salesian*: it implies a return to the essence of our vocation: God and His Kingdom. God must be our primary 'occupation'. It is He who sends and entrusts young people to us so that we may help them mature to the stature of Christ, the perfect man. For us, the recovery of spirituality cannot be separated from the mission, if we want to avoid the risk of evasion. God is waiting for us in young people to give us the grace of an encounter with Him (cf. C.95; GC23). It is therefore inconceivable and unjustifiable that the 'mission' can be an obstacle to the encounter with God and the cultivation of intimacy with Him.

2. *The consistency of the communities*: the quality of community life and educative-pastoral action require a solid consistency in both quantity and quality of the Salesian community. All proposals aimed at making daily life formative and improving methodologies, activities or content inevitably clash with the real possibilities of the community. For us, the community represents a fundamental element of profession, together with the vows and the mission. More profoundly, it constitutes the sphere in which we must live spirituality, mission and vows. We cannot, therefore, persist in claiming to solve every problem at the expense of the charism.

3. *Resignification of presence*: this is a requirement of both the community and the mission, aiming at the quality of both. In the past, when people spoke of 're-dimensioning', the emphasis was on closing works or entrusting them to other members of the Salesian Family. Today, however, while it is reiterated that "redesigning" is an inevitable task if we do not want to weaken the communities and overburden the confreres, the emphasis falls on the "significance" and redesigning of the Salesian presence in the territory. This is not limited to the work, but rather represents a *way of being, working, and organising oneself* that aims not only at effectiveness (responding to the needs of the recipients), but also at generating meaning, opening perspectives, involving people, and promoting innovative responses. In other words, like Jesus, to create 'signs' that provoke participation – and nothing is more powerful than being Salesians passionate for Jesus Christ and dedicated to young people. It is an invitation to relocate the Province where the needs of young people are most urgent and where our presence is most fruitful. We must therefore be aware that our consecrated life will not be omnipresent, and in many contexts not even socially relevant, but it will continue to be necessary for the Christian community to the extent that it is an authentic sign of the coming Kingdom.

4. *The quality of the educative-pastoral proposal*: the path taken up to now has been, at least in many realities, characterised by the expansion and multiplication of works, sometimes compromising the quality of our activity, since we have ended up favouring the administrative aspect over the pastoral one, or the maintenance and construction of structures more than the clarity and seriousness of the educative-pastoral project. Today we are called upon to develop more intense forms of evangelisation, to focus on human maturation and education in the faith, to adequately form our co-workers, to integrate the educative-pastoral community and, together with it, to develop and implement a shared project. This is an

essential part of meaningfulness.

5. *The formation of the Salesian*: the complexity of contemporary situations, the challenges posed by the young, the need for the new evangelisation and the task of inculturation naturally require a formation adequate to this renewed life, capable of enabling the Salesian to live his vocation with dynamism and solidity, to carry out the mission with professionalism and competence, to personally assimilate the charismatic identity, which is nothing other than appropriating the gift received from God in the call. The document on Formation in Consecrated Life clearly states: "The renewal of religious institutes depends primarily on the formation of their members."[\[43\]](#) This represents, in my opinion, the greatest challenge facing the Congregation today, to which it has intended to respond with the elaboration of the new Ratio.[\[44\]](#)

I do not think the question from the 1970s, which emerged after the Council, should be raised again: "Religious life again?" Such a question, even from an anthropological point of view, seems meaningless. The Church and the World need people who make a profession of embodying the interest in the Absolute, in the essential, and who constitute a reserve of humanism, a powerful, eloquent and radical sign of the '*sequela Christi*'. This is what the Second Vatican Council desired and expected from religious life. This has been the goal of the Congregation during these last 60 years: to be faithful to Christ and to Don Bosco with a dynamic and vital fidelity.

Rome, May 2025

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[\[1\]](#) VECCHI J. E., 'Pastoral Care, Education, Pedagogy in Salesian Praxis', in *Il Cammino e la Prospettiva 2000*, from the Dicastery for Youth Ministry – SDB. Rome, 1991, Pp. 8.9. The article is very interesting, even though it only takes into consideration the post-conciliar evolution in the realisation of the Salesian mission.

[\[2\]](#) ACG 319 (1986), p. 4.

[\[3\]](#) Cf. SCHNEIDERS Sandra M., *Finding the Treasure*. Religious Life in a New Millennium. Mahwa, N.J. 2000. Pp. 13-17.

[4] VECCHI, 'Pastoral...', 9.

[5] VIGANÒ Egidio, *The XXII General Chapter*, ACS 305 p. 7.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] VIGANÒ Egidio, ACS 305 p. 9.

[8] Cf. RICCERI Luigi, *Letter from the Rector Major* (ACS, 25. Pp. 3-9); *General Report on the State of the Congregation*. Special General Chapter. Rome, 1971. CGS Documents. Vol. I Orientations. Rome, 1971.

[9] RICCERI Luigi, *Letter from the Rector Major*, ACS 254 p. 6.

[10] Cf. WIRTH Morand, *From Don Bosco to the present day. Tra storia e nuove sfide (1815-2000)*. Rome, 2000. P. 452.

[11] Cf. *Report*, pp. 5-6, 19-21, 33-42.

[12] Cf. WIRTH, *From Don Bosco*, 452-454.

[13] Cf. RICCERI Luigi, *Convocation of General Chapter 21* (ACS, 283 pp. 3-11); *General Report on the State of the Congregation to GC21*. Rome, 1977; *Chapter Documents*. Rome, 1978.

[14] VECCHI Juan E., "Towards a new stage of Salesian youth ministry" in *Il Cammino e la Prospettiva 2000*. Edited by the Dicastero per la Pastorale Giovanile – SDB. Rome, 1991 pp. 46-47.

[15] VECCHI, 'Towards...', pp. 70-71.82; WIRTH, *From Don Bosco*, 471.

[16] Cf. VIGANÒ E., *Il Capitolo Generale XXII* (ACS, 305 pp. 5-20); *La Società di San Francesco di Sales nel sessennio 1978-1983*. Report of the Rector Major to GC22. Rome, 1983; *Documents of the GC22* (Operational Orientations). Rome, 1984.

[17] *General Chapter 22 of the Society of St Francis de Sales*. Documents. Rome, 1984 p. 19.

[18] Cf. WIRTH, *From Don Bosco*, 468.

[19] Cf. VIGANO Egidio, *Convocation of General Chapter 23 (ACG, 327 pp. 3-25); The Society of St Francis de Sales in the six-year term 1984-1990*. Report of the Rector Major. Rome, 1990. *Educating Young People in the Faith*. Chapter Documents. Rome, 1990.

[20] WIRTH, *From Don Bosco*, 483-484.

[21] Cf. VIGANÒ Egidio, *Convocation of General Chapter 24 (ACG, 350 pp. 3-33)*. VECCHI Juan E., *The Society of St Francis de Sales in the sexennial 1990-95*. Report of the Vicar of the Rector Major. Rome, 1996. *Salesians and Laity: communion and participation in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco*. Chapter Document. Rome, 1996.

[22] Cf. VECCHI Juan E., *Towards General Chapter 25 (ACG, 372 pp. 3-39)*.

[23] LIPOVETSKY G., *La era del vacío*, Barcelona, 41990, citado por Albuquerque E., *Cuadernos de Formación Permanente*, CCS. Madrid, 2001 p. 97.

[24] VECCHI, *Verso...*, 14.

[25] Fr Chávez, "Witnesses of evangelical radicalism. Called to live Don Bosco's apostolic project in fidelity. "Work and Temperance", ACG 413 (2012) 5. Italics are mine

[26] "Only through conversion does one come to be a Christian; this is as valid for the entire existence of the individual as for the life of the Church" (Benedict XVI, "Warum ich noch in der Kirche bin", en Id., *Grundsatzreden aus fünf Jahrzehnten*, Regensburg 2005, 105-107).

[27] John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 18.

[28] "In our time, when in vast areas of the earth faith is in danger of dying out like a flame that can no longer find nourishment, the priority above all else is to make God present in this world and to open up access to God to people. Not to any god, but to that God who spoke on Sinai; to that God whose face we recognise in love driven to the end (cf. *Jn* 13:1) – in Jesus Christ crucified and risen. The real problem at this moment in our history is that God is disappearing from the horizon of mankind, and that with the extinguishing of the light coming from God, humanity is being seized by a lack of orientation, the destructive effects of which are becoming ever more apparent to us". (Benedict XVI, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic*

*Church on the remission of the excommunication of the four bishops consecrated by Archbishop Lefebvre*, Vatican, 20 March 2009. Cf.

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/letters/2009/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_le\\_20090310\\_remissione-scomunica\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_le_20090310_remissione-scomunica_it.html)

[29] Chávez, 'Witnesses', 8.22.

[30] Chávez, 'Witnesses', 19.

[31] John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, No. 38

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] VECCHI, 'Pastoral', 8.

[35] SCHNEIDERS, *Finding*. xxiii.

[36] VIGANÒ E., ACG 339 pp. 12-13.

[37] Cf. BARTOLOMÉ Juan José, "Malestar de la fe, ¿en la vida consagrada? Una cuestión previa a la evangelización", *Salesianum* 62 (2000), 147-164.

[38] Cf. PIKAZA X., *Esquema teológico de la Vida Religiosa*. Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca 1978, pp. 29-44.

[39] Cf. CENCINI A., "Identidad y Misión de la Vida Consagrada", *Confer* 154 (2001), 251-268.

[40] Cf. MOLONEY Francis J., *Disciples and Prophets: A Biblical Model for the Religious Life*. Edited by Darton, Longman and Todd in London, 1980.

[41] VECCHI Juan E., *Experts, Witnesses, and Builders of Communion*. ACG 363, 21. It is no coincidence that Fr Vecchi himself quotes this text in his letter convening GC25, ACG 372, 30.

[42] Cf. AA.VV., *For Creative Fidelity*. Refounding: relocating charisms, redesigning presence. The Calamus. Rome, 1999, which collects the 54th *Conventus Semestralis of the USG*, in Ariccia in November 1998.

[\[43\]](#) *Potissimum Institutioni*, 1.

[\[44\]](#) *The Formation of Salesians by Don Bosco*. Principles and Norms. Ratio Institutionis et Studiorum. *Fifth Edition*. Rome, 13 January 2025.